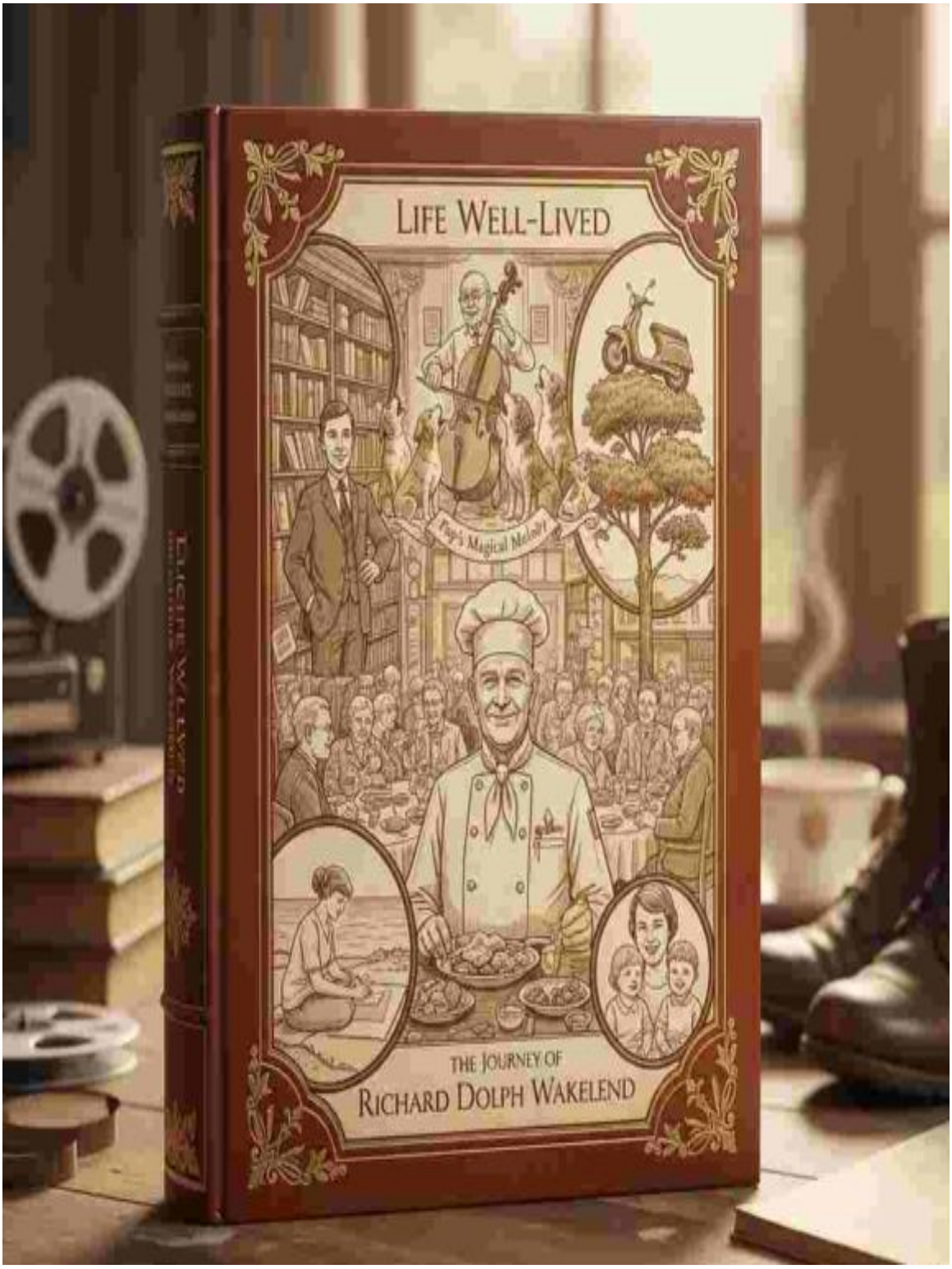

A Life Well-Lived: The Journey of Richard Dolph Wakefield

Richard Dolph Wakefield's life is a vibrant tapestry woven with music, literature, adventure, resilience, and deep human connection, always anchored by an unwavering work ethic and a

profound love for fairness. From his earliest days to the present, his journey is a testament to a spirit that not only survived hardship but consistently sought to create beauty, meaning, and kindness in the world.

1. Early Life and Foundational Bonds

Born in Bathurst, my earliest memories blend tenderness with challenges. Around eight, a year before my mother's passing, I'd accompany my grandfather, "Pop," on odd jobs like cutting cauliflowers. Mischievous even then, I secretly pre-cut the vegetables, leaving Pop puzzled when they toppled before his knife—a prank that cemented our cherished bond.

Pop, a semi-famous multi-instrumentalist who played cello, viola, and violin, even entranced neighborhood dogs with his music—they would come into the house and howl along with the cello. He introduced me to classical music and the boundless world of books. His legacy lives on in an interview with Australian folklorists John Meredith and Chris Sullivan. Pop also taught me to shoot and sparked my brother's interest in gold panning, reflecting our family's German gold rush heritage.

He had a unique approach to reading: a stack of old Gold Medal Westerns sufficed. When I asked for more, he'd say, "Why buy more? They're all the same stories, just different covers," re-reading them over and over. It instilled in me a deep appreciation for the power of stories.

After my mother passed at 28, life darkened. We moved from my grandmother's home in Crows Nest to Bradfield Park, then Blacktown, facing abuse fueled by alcohol. Beatings and manipulative ultimatums became routine. Yet, small refuges appeared—like after-hours trips to Lindfield Library during my father and stepmother's cleaning shifts. Reading and drawing there nurtured my lifelong love of books and creativity, even in the darkest times.

By 14, I exhibited astonishing self-reliance: leaving home, delivering newspapers, and supporting myself in a boarding house. My brother Robert found refuge with Pop in Bathurst, while my youngest sister, Margaret, stayed longer. Though the period was harsh, it forged independence, resilience, and a lifelong appreciation for safety, kindness, and strong family bonds.

2. Youthful Connections and Bookselling Legend

Living with my grandmother in Crows Nest, I found solace and friendship. My childhood friend Jeff St. John, despite having spina bifida, grew into a "damn good singer" who later achieved fame before his passing in 2018. Through my brother, I also connected with Roland Hillcoat—better known as Roland Storm—another emerging singer. These early connections hinted at the vibrant music scene that would shape my youth.

As a teenager, I embraced the "wild spirit of youth," frequenting dances at Sydney venues like The Sound Lounge and Surf City at Kings Cross. I met countless people, including future music icons Billy Thorpe and Tony Worsley. Despite the lively scene, I never got into trouble—a core part of my

character.

At 15, I began my bookselling career at Angus & Robertson on Castlereagh Street. My mentor, Hedley Jefferies, was the soul of the bookstore—wise, kind, and passionate about literature. He read every book he recommended and trusted me, even as a teenager, to review titles honestly. One unforgettable moment was reading Robert Ludlum's The Scarlatti Inheritance—we were "spot on," and copies flew off the shelves. Hedley's mentorship shaped my understanding of integrity, trust, and the enduring value of stories.

The world at A&R; extended beyond the shop floor. Thursdays and Fridays, the upstairs bar at the Surry Hotel became an unofficial literary club. Booksellers and publishers' reps gathered like family, with lively discussions and occasional visits from literary giants like Sir Walter Stone and Ion Idriess. Even Norman Lindsay, whose works A&R; published, dropped by from Springwood. These experiences created lasting friendships and a sense of belonging.

Looking back, the book trade has changed dramatically. The rise of co-authored works, "estate hacks," and profit-driven publishing often frustrates me. The personal, meticulous curation Hedley and I practiced—reading every book, recommending only what we truly believed in—feels rare today. Sharing these stories preserves the memory of Hedley Jefferies and the golden age of a great Australian bookstore.

3. Military Service and Culinary Adventures

At 20, I entered National Service and quickly realized the army food was terrible. I became a cook, eventually joining Army Intelligence in Mosman, conveniently close to home. Ever the individualist, I piped my own music into the dining rooms via a reel-to-reel tape recorder, adding a personal touch to the regimented environment.

Army life was full of memorable moments. I ran a profitable side business spit-shining parade boots, only to be caught with a rusty rifle barrel during a surprise inspection. And there was the legendary prank at Puckapunyal: after a major angered the men, all standing in their underwear during lineup, we hoisted his motor scooter into a gum tree—a harmlessly vengeful act of collective ingenuity.

Catering training took me to South Australia, to a place called Hampstead Barracks. On weekends a few of us would go to Victor Harbour, a beautiful spot. One of our group came from there.

4. From Books to Animation and Back to Culinary Arts

After the army, the call of books drew me back to Angus & Robertson. Though I'd risen to head my own department, life had changed. Around 1977, I briefly ran receiving and dispatch as Gordon Barton prepared to take ownership—a period that reinforced my aversion to poorly considered corporate changes. It was also around this time, at a party in Bondi, that I met Dawn, marking the end of my "oneness."

Next, I worked at Ashwood's, a famed used books and record shop near Central Station. I visited homes for hidden literary gems, priced them for resale, and often proved my boss wrong with consistent profits. A close friendship with a Uniting Church minister added warmth to this period.

An unexpected leap took me into animation at Hanna-Barbera in St Leonards. The creative work was stimulating, but deadlines and unpredictable footage made it unstable for a married man seeking steady employment.

Between March and December 1977, I worked at Harper & Row in Artarmon. They published Colleen McCullough's The Thorn Birds, and I used family photos for the promotional poster, including a baby picture of my mother in a pram. Colleen approved—it left a lasting impression.

Eventually, I returned to books once more. I took over Brainfood Books near Sydney University—once locking a customer inside while I did the banking, trusting I'd return. Later, I joined Abbey's Bookshops, creating two bookplates sold across Sydney.

5. Family, Fulfillment, and Culinary Legacy

The most poignant chapter began when Dawn and I moved back to Bathurst to be near my aging grandfather, Pop, reciprocating his years of love and care. My friend, the minister Rick Anderson, re-entered our lives, renewing my faith.

Early ventures—like selling books in Machattie Park—didn't pan out. I later worked cutting asparagus at Edgell's rather than be "on the dole."

In Kelso, I applied for a cooking job at the newly opened Moran's nursing home. I started with six residents and eased back into my craft, with Dawn helping develop excellent recipes.

A year later, I interviewed at Kim's Resort in Toowoon Bay and secured the job. After years of trying for a family, and even considering adoption, we were blessed with two children—Ryan and then Alana.

Two years later, a chance meeting with Barry Malligan led me to Nareen Gardens at Bateau Bay. I wasn't initially head chef, but after a grilling debacle, I was called in from holidays and later promoted to Catering Officer, catering for 300+ residents with full creative freedom.

During this period, Rosemary Lodge—an RSL home nearby—faced a crisis with an injured chef. I was asked to help and took my holidays to do so. I laid down one condition: complete control over recipes and ordering. I ended up staying three years as the lodge changed hands from RSL to Amity, then to Bupa. In 2005, when Bupa tried to impose Margaret Fulton's recipes, I resigned and returned to Nareen Gardens until my retirement in 2010 or 2011.

6. Post-Retirement and Enduring Passions

After retirement, I volunteered at Nareen Gardens for six years—playing music for residents and reading audiobooks for the vision impaired.

A year ago, I considered helping at a charity shop but walked out after seeing books overpriced—my lifelong commitment to fairness unchanged.

At home, cats have brought joy for more than 50 years. Our current cat knows the word “biscuits,” waits for the washing machine, and meows at the door—small things that add warmth to our lives.

Through it all, Dawn and I built a life of love, creativity, and resilience.

I give thanks to God, to Dawn, to Pop, to Rev. David Bowden, Rev. Rick Anderson, Hedley Jefferies, and to my children, Alana and Ryan—people who left a lasting impression on my life.